



Four-Blocks and Building Blocks: Language Arts Instructional System

Introduction:

In January 2004, the elementary teachers were introduced to a language arts instructional system called Four-Blocks and made a commitment to adopt the process and use it in their classrooms. In addition, the Pre-K and K teachers committed to a companion process called Building Blocks. The method is being used extensively throughout the United States and Europe and is supported by a strong body of research verifying that test scores improve when teachers use the Four-Blocks system.

The Four-Blocks system includes four literacy blocks that are taught in every 1st through 5th grade classroom, every day. They are:

- ❖ **Guided Reading** - Guided reading focuses on comprehension. Children learn to predict what might happen or what they might learn. They learn about the story elements of character, setting, and plot, and they learn how to organize and compare information learned from text.
- ❖ **Self Selected Reading** – The self-selected reading block ensures that all children experience daily read-alouds and time for reading books of their choice and on their own level. Research tells us that children who have been read to regularly and who have time each day to read books will become readers.
- ❖ **Working with Words** – The fascinating world of words gives young learners the power to decode and comprehend as they read and the ability to spell and express their thoughts as they write. In the working with words block children practice decoding, spelling words, and learning high-frequency words by engaging in activities to learn how words work.
- ❖ **Writing** – The writing block includes a mini-lesson that provides children with a model of what writers do. During the block, children engage in various writing activities from starting a new piece, finishing a piece, revising, editing, or illustrating. Another component includes conferences that lead to a final published piece.

Building Blocks for Pre-K and K

Because early literacy is so important for our primary students, we made a decision to implement the Building Blocks process in our kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classrooms. Building Blocks is a process that introduces the children to literacy. It is a process that provides an excellent foundation for students moving into the first grade.

How does the process work in kindergarten?

In kindergarten, teachers use the Building Blocks framework to provide a variety of reading and writing experiences from which all children develop these six critical understandings, which provide the “building blocks” to their success.

- ❑ **Desire to Learn to Read and Write:** Children learn that reading provides both enjoyment and information, and they develop a desire to learn to read and write.

- ❑ **Language Concepts:** Students also learn many new concepts and add words and meaning to their speaking vocabularies
- ❑ **Print Concepts:** Children learn print concepts, including how to read from left to right, how to read a page from top to bottom, etc.
- ❑ **Phonemic Awareness:** Children develop phonemic awareness, including the concept of rhyme.
- ❑ **Interesting Words:** Students learn to read and write some words that are interesting to them such as “Pizza Hut,” “cat,” and “bear.”
- ❑ **Letters and Sounds:** Students learn some letter names and sounds usually connected to the interesting words they have learned.

These six areas are integrated with the themes and units that are part of every kindergarten day.

How is the Building Blocks process used in pre-kindergarten?

Many of the understandings learned in kindergarten are also applicable to pre-kindergarten children. In pre-kindergarten, teachers introduce children to language through a variety of experiences to get them ready for kindergarten. Since we are an international school, many of our children entering Pre-K are not fluent in English. In our pre-kindergarten classrooms, children are immersed in the English language through nursery rhymes, poems, stories, acting, writing and speaking so that when they enter kindergarten they are prepared for a more structured language arts program.

How can parents support their children’s literacy?

In the last 15 years, our understanding of the way children learn to read has shifted from “reading readiness” to a new concept known as “emergent literacy.” We know that literacy develops gradually through a variety of experiences with reading or writing, beginning at birth. As children are reading books and other print around them, (signs, advertisements, products in the grocery store, etc.) they begin to:

- ❖ Understand who we read and write
- ❖ Build background knowledge
- ❖ Learn print concepts (i.e., we read from left to right and top to bottom)
- ❖ Learn some concrete words
- ❖ Learn some letter names and sounds
- ❖ Develop their desire to learn to read and write on their own

Literacy literally emerges in their young minds as each of these understandings develops.

One of the crucial aspects of literacy that develops in emergent readers is known as phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the recognition that words are made up of individual sounds and the ability to manipulate sounds.

Especially for Parents: *To help your child learn phonemic awareness, read, read, read, and read some more!* When your child hears the sounds that make up words he or she begins to develop phonemic awareness.

Alphabet books are an excellent resource for phonemic awareness, as they emphasize the beginning sounds of words. When you read these books, ask your child to name the objects he sees in the pictures, and stress those first letter sounds

Nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books are also great sources for phonemic awareness development. The rhyme and rhythm of these books make them easy to remember and to recite.

Are there some great books that encourage phonemic awareness?

Yes there are!

ALPHABET BOOKS

- *A, My Name is Alice*, by Jane Bayer
- *A is for ... ?* by Henry Horenstein
- *A is for Artist*, by Christopher Hudson
- *Basketball ABC*, by Florence Cassen Mayers

RHYMING BOOKS

- *There's a Wocket in My Pocket*, by Dr. Seuss
- *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, by Dr. Seuss
- *Horton Hears a Who!* by Dr. Seuss

YOU MAY ALSO ENJOY

- *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* By Eric Carle
- *Tomie de Paola's Favorite Nursery Rhymes*, by Tomie de Paola
- *Miss Spider's Tea Party*, by David Kirk
- *My Nose Is a Hose*, by Ken Salisbury

The authors of the Four Blocks and Building Blocks instructional models are Dorothy P. Hall, Patricia Cunningham, Cheryl Sigmon, and Elaine Williams. The majority of the informational text in this article comes from their books and website. Read more about the Four-Blocks/Building Blocks methodology at this website:

<http://www.four-blocks.com/index.htm>